

The Media Framing of Environmental Issues in China and the Central - Local Fragmentation of Political Control in the Party - Press System:

A Case Study of Media Reporting on the 2007 Tai Lake Water Crisis

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中国の環境問題のメディア報道と国家コントロールメディアシステムにおける中央と地方の分裂する権威：
「2007 太湖水危機」の事例研究

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Abstract

Since the environmental issue became a hot topic of the Chinese mass media in the late 1990s, the media's framing of environmental issues has not only promoted the general environmental awareness, but also made it salient the connection between the environmental problems and delinquency of the government or even system defects of Chinese politics. Did it mean the mass media had obtained a freedom to criticize politics? If so, where was the freedom from? Was it from the marketization and westernization, or was there any factor in the Party-press system to make the result?

The characteristic was reflected in the media framing of a water pollution crisis in 2007. At the end of May 2007, the source of tap water for Wuxi Municipality, Jiangsu Province, located in Tai Lake, having brought serious environmental and social impact. We found some mass media framed the crisis as the result of the long-term accumulation of environmental pollution, criticizing the local government of poor environmental governance, and emphasizing the necessity of applying democratic means to the problem resolution, while the others insisted it was just a natural disaster which could not have been attributed to local governmental deficiency. We also found the former framing was conducted by the Central Government-controlled media and remote media, with the latter by the local-controlled media.

This paper ascribed the main reason of the different framing to the fragmentation of the political control over the mass media between the Central Government and the local government. Under the contemporary Party-press system, the political authority controls the

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on the decentralization during the economic reform period. In the practice, the degree of their difference depends on their realistic interest and long-term purpose, which were the main analysis of this paper. The process of the power games inside the political authority provided the mass media with chance of not only criticizing the certain governance, but also making salient of the democratic discourse in the issue frame.

Keywords: environmental crisis, media issue frame, direction on public opinion, decentralization, cross-regional supervision

Appendix:

Media¹:

Beijing News: 新京报

CCTV: China Central Television: 中国中央电视台

China News Week, 中国新闻周刊

Chongqing Shangbao (Chongqing Economic Daily): 重庆商报

Diyi Caijing Ribao (First Financial Daily): 第一财经日报

Guangzhou Daily: 广州日报

Lianhe Zaobao (United Morning News, Singapore): 联合早报

Nangfang Dushi Bao (Nangfang Metropolis Paper): 南方都市报

People's Daily, Overseas Version: 人民日报海外版

People's Daily: 人民日报

Southern Weekend: 南方周末

Wuxi Daily: 无锡日报

Xiandai Kuaibao (Modern Flash Report): 现代快报

Xihua Daily, Jiangsu Province: 新华日报

Xinhua News Agency (New China News Agency): 新华社

Xinxi Shibao (Information Times): 信息时报

Yangcheng Wanbao (Yangcheng Evening News): 羊城晚报

Yangtze Evening Post: 扬子晚报

Yanzhao Dushi Bao (Yanzhao Metropolis Paper): 燕赵都市报

Yazhou Zhoukan: 亚洲周刊

Political institutions:

CPPCC: Chinese People's Political Consultative Committee: 中国人民政治协商会议

MWR: Ministry of Water Resources: 水利部

SEPA: State Environmental Protection Administration/Ministry of Environmental

1 Some media have commonly accepted English titles, while some others do not have formal translations. For the latter, the paper used Pinyin (Chinese pronunciations), with simple explanations in English added.

Protection: 国家环境保护总局/环境部²

Public institutions:

CASS: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: 中国社会科学院

NGOs:

IPE: Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs: 公众与环境研究中心

Introduction:

Since the late 1990s, the mass media has been commonly considered as taking an active role in environmental issues of China. There has been an argument that the media's framing³ of environmental issues has not only promoted the general environmental awareness, but also made it salient the connection between the environmental problem and system defects of Chinese politics⁴. It might bring the impression that the mass media had got the freedom to criticize the political authority, and, promote the social environmental movement, which was expected by the normative standards of Western environmental journalism. Does the image really reflect the true situation?

Even though it wouldn't be ignored that the economic reform had brought high commercialization and marketization to the Chinese mass media, there was few fundamental changes in the institutional control⁵. According to the liberal belief, a commercialized media market was expected to provide a variety of groups and individuals with the opportunity to

2 This agency was promoted to semi-ministerial status in 1998, and became the Ministry of Environmental Protection in 2008. This paper uses the old name to be in accordance with existing research.

3 For the mass media, to "frame" is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the issue described. See, Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, 43 (4), Autumn, 1993, pp. 51-58.

4 See, for example, Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun, "Media, civil society, and the rise of a green public sphere in China", in Peter Ho and Richard L. Edmons, ed., *China's Embedded Activism: Opportunities and Constraints of A Social Movement*, London ; New York : Routledge, 2008, pp. 69-88.

5 Plenty of researchers have paid attention to the development of such substances considered necessary for press freedom in the Western sense from many respects, but they all admit that such factors have not fundamentally altered the party-press system. Zhao Yuezhi systematically introduced the commercialization of Chinese media and how managers and journalists attempted to adapt their operation to the market, see, Zhao Yuezhi, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998. Zhao, "From commercialization to conglomeration: the transformation of the Chinese press within the orbit of the Party State," *Journal of Commercialization*, 50(2), 2000, pp. 3-26. Lee Chin-Chuan noticed the potential influence of the entrance into WTO and of the government, see, Lee Chin-Chuan, "The global and the national of the Chinese media: discourse, market, technology, and the ideology," in Lee, Chin-chuan, ed., *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 1-31. Some others found that educated young journalists accepted western journalistic professionalism with localization in China, see, for example, Hugo de Burgh, *The Chinese Journalist: Mediating Information in the World's Most Populous County*, London: New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 105-112. Pan Zhongdang and Lu Ye, "Localizing professionalism: discursive practices in China's media reforms," in *Chinese Media, Global Contexts*, pp. 215-236. Further, McCormick pointed out that the increasing disobedience of some journalists in the commercialized media, in some special cases, made the confrontation between the media and government come to surface, see, Barrett L. McCormick, "Censorship and accountability in the Chinese media," in Hua Shiping and Guo Sujian ed., *China in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Opportunities*, Association of Chinese Political Studies. Meeting (19th: 2006: University of Louisville), 2007, pp. 127-151.

express their views, which would form a free “market of ideas”⁶. In other words, the important point was that the actors having access to express their interest in the mass media should have been pluralized⁷. The Chinese media system is criticized because the state was the only actor allowed to have a last say in media issue framing⁸. Thus, the strict censorship and the special identity of journalists — involved in the state administrative establishment — transmitters of state orthodoxy rather than mediators between people and the government in the Western sense⁹. The Chinese official discourse of giving orthodoxy to the mass media was “direction on public opinion (*yu lun yin dao*)”¹⁰.

However, my central proposition is that the state is not a single actor since the attitudes of the Central and local governments on certain issues are not totally uniform, which means there are at least two kinds of “orthodoxy” for the media, thus, the Party-press relationship in practice is not the simple interaction between the commercialized media and political pressure, but a game among the Central government, the local government, and the mass media. The decentralization during economic reform strengthened local finances, making local governments more able to challenge the Central authority and leading to potential contradictions and power struggles on difference in concrete policies, fundamental strategy, or core values¹¹. Although the degree of the contradiction might vary upon the cases, it had become a recognized characteristic of the political system itself. The Central-local contradiction and the initiatives of mass media developed from marketization decided the details of interaction among the Central government, the local government, and the media. This interaction is a critical factor when deciding the issue frame of the mass media.

This paper took a water pollution case of 2007, known as “Tai Lake blue-green algae accident”, or “Tai Lake water crisis”, for a case study. At the end of May 2007, the source of tap water for Wuxi Municipality, Jiangsu Province, located in Tai Lake, had been severely polluted by blue-green algae. Not only were numerous citizens forced to live with insufficient

6 For more details on the substances of media freedom in the Western sense, see, John Keane, *The Media and Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity, 1991.

7 Although history has told us it was just an idealistic model, as those actors having more resources or performing more actively were more competitive in public debate.

8 See, for example, Su Shaozhi, “Chinese communist ideology and media control,” in Lee, Chin-Chuan, *China's Media, Media's China*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

9 Burgh, *The Chinese Journalist*, pp. 107-112.

10 Utilization of this discourse was established by Jiang Zemin in the middle 1990s, with the core meaning of conveying party guides through the media, See, *Guide People with Correct Public Opinion: Study on the Important Speech of General Secretary, Jiang Zeming* in the investigation in the *People's Daily*, Beijing: People's Daily Publication, 1996.

11 The central-local relations in China was a more complex interaction in institution, procedure, and norm, considered as a relatively institutionalized pattern involving explicit or implicit bargains between the center and the provinces, with one element in the bargain being that the provinces receive certain institutionalized or ad hoc benefits in return for guarantees by provincial officials that they will behave in certain ways on behalf of the center. See, for example, Zheng Yongnian, *De Facto Federalism in China: Reforms and Dynamics of Central-Local*, Singapore: Hackensack, N.J.: World Scientific, 2007, p. 39. Jia Hao and Lin Zhimin ed., *Changing Central-Local Relations in China: Reform and State Capacity*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1994. Bo Zhiyue, *Chinese Provincial Leaders: Economic Performance and Political Mobility since 1949*, Armonk, N. Y. : M. E. Sharpe, 2002.

water for several days, but the whole city was gripped by panic. In this crisis, the local media and the remote media demonstrated different performances of issue framing. The core difference was that the local media insisted it was a natural disaster which could not have been attributed to local governmental deficiency, while remote media emphasized its connection with the long-term accumulation of environmental pollution, indicating serious mistakes in local environmental governance, and, spreading negative information never appearing in the local media.

This paper selected its case because 1) it attracted a long-lasting media attention — from the end of May 2007 to July 2007 — that provides us with numerous articles and is helpful for our analysis on the reporting focus over the lapse of time, 2) it was judged by the mass media as a typical case reflecting serious water pollution and poor environmental governance in China¹², 3) the crisis happened in Wuxi City, a most economic-developed city in the advanced East China area, with the urban citizens having good living and comparatively well-educated, and, in addition, a most competitive media market with highly-commercialized media were located in this area, which was beneficial for us to judge how great a role these elements necessary for a free mass media could have played in this crisis, comparing with the political control; 4) it drew attention from both local media, Central government-directed media, and other remote media, making it possible to compare the local and the Central government's direction on public opinion separately, and the initiatives of the remote media in response.

Although broadcast media, print media, internet media all participated in the reporting, this paper will focus on print media because compared with broadcasting media, information searched from print media is more complete and concentrated, providing us with more credible results. Furthermore, compared with internet media, which includes much more information from uncertain sources and personal expressions, print media is more beneficial for analyzing the political influence on media content. This paper selected the two largest-circulation daily papers in the local region, whose respective “departments in charge”¹³ were different — directly controlled by local agencies or Central agencies — so as to compare the direction on public opinion of the local and the Central authority. The contents of remote media — it was impossible to check all the remote print media one by one — were obtained from a collection of portal websites. Several commonly recognized influential

¹² Water crises became the most frequently occurring environmental crisis in China in the 1990s. For example, in 1990, Wuxi suffered from half a month without tap water due to blue-green algae. Recently, in February 2006, the water resource of Mudanjiang Municipality, Heilongjiang Province, was officially announced as polluted, leading to a panic buying of pure water. The last serious accident may be the severe pollution along Songhua River, Heilongjiang Province, from November to December 2006, caused by leaking benzene from a chemical plant explosion, resulting in the resignation of the head of the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA).

¹³ A newspaper must be directly led and controlled by a department in charge of the publishing entity, according to Regulations on the Administration of Newspaper Publication, Article 8, issued by General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP), 2005, published in the official site of China State Council. Source: www.gov.cn

websites — the People's Daily Network (*ren min wang*), Sina.com (*xin lang*), Sohu.com (*sou hu*), 163.com, and Yahoo China — were referred to in case a single website might have a bias in its news collection.

Crisis Background and Process:

Factually, the 2007 Tai Lake water crisis was not unprecedented. The pollution of blue-green algae began in the 1970s, and, as early as in 1990, the Wuxi City suffered from half a month without tap water due to the pollution¹⁴.

The Central government had paid great attention to the natural environment improvement in the Tai Lake basin. In the 1990s, the Central government developed a series of special policies such as “The Ninth Five-year Plan of Tai Lake Pollution Management and 2010 Plan (*tai hu wu ran zhi li jiu wu ji hua ji 2010 nian gui hua*)” and “The Tenth Five-year Plan of Tai Lake Pollution Management (*tai hu wu ran zhi li shi wu ji hua*).” 10 trillion yuan renminbi was invested with another 100 trillion in planned investment. However, the situation hadn't been mitigated, even the official “Tenth Five-year Plan” admitted that not all the goals of the “Ninth Five-year Plan” had been achieved. The extensive investment without significant effects had led a Central-local contradiction to emerge: a principle of “local chief executive responsibility system” (*xing zheng shou zhang fu ze zhi*) was utilized in the pollution management of Tai Lake, giving the local government crucial powers such as “financing, policy execution, supervision on certain project process”¹⁵. The related Central agencies, officials, and the mainstream media generally attributed the ineffectiveness to poor performances of local governments in the Tai Lake area. Especially, the State Environmental Protection Administration (SEPA), the Central agency responsible for coordinating the work of different local actors, was unsatisfied with its weakness in administrative and material resources, greatly limiting its capacity to supervise the local governmental behaviors¹⁶, and pursued more influence.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the potential danger reflected from April 25, and the material threat found at the latest on May 25 and recognized by local officials including political leaders and related agencies, were not made public. Information about the Provincial

14 The blue-green algae (cyanophyte) are a kind of prokaryote found mostly in fresh water; some species produce neurotoxins, hepatotoxins, cytotoxins, and endotoxins, making them dangerous to animals and humans. Common to residents in the Tai Lake area, each summer the blue-green algae reproduce massively and leave remains floating on the lake, a process that has increased since the 1970s due to man-made processes from agricultural fertilizer, industry, and domestic waste. According to some research materials from 2001, in the rural area of Wuxi Municipality both surface water and ground water in superficial layers were badly polluted and had become undrinkable. See, Research Centre of Environment and Development of CASS: *China Environment and Development Review*, Vol. 1, Beijing: Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 2001.

15 SEPA, “The Tenth Five-year Plan of Tai Lake Pollution Management”, Articles 1, 2, and 3.

16 See, for example, Abigail R. Jahiel, “The organization of environmental protection in China,” *China Quarterly*, No. 156, Special Issue: China's Environment, Dec.1998, pp. 757-787. UNDP: *China Human Development Report 2002: Making Green Development to a Choice*, 2002, pp. 75-77. Elizabeth C. Economy, *The River Runs Black: The Environmental Challenge to China's Future*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 92, pp. 105-112.

and Municipal Government taking some emergency measures against the unusual phenomena was published in some local Party papers; however, these papers generally attract little attention from common citizens¹⁷. On May 28, a lot of citizens noticing the tap water had become too smelly to be used called the hotline of the Wuxi Municipal Government, which vaguely responded that there was no serious issue with the water quality¹⁸. Without any official explanation, a two-day social panic occurred through the spread of complaints, conjectures, and internet rumors¹⁹.

Table 1: Time table of the event process

Time	Events
April 25–May 7	Potential danger was found. ²⁰
May 8	Wuxi Municipal Government planned emergency measures.
May 16 – 25	Deterioration of water quality was found in several waterworks.
May 21	Wuxi Municipal Government launched emergency measures.
May 28	Crisis broken out — about 70 percent of drinking water in Wuxi Municipality had been polluted, affecting two million citizens.
May 30	Information released in the local mass media.
May 31	Wuxi Municipal Government's press conference held, emphasizing unpredictable natural causes; public crisis answer mechanism launched.
June 1	A meeting discussing emergency measures allowed the mass media to sit in, attracting 30 media agencies through the country ²¹ .
June 2	Vice Premier, Zeng, gave comments on local environmental governance.
June 3 – 4	Wuxi Municipal Government reiterated that water quality reached standards.
June 5	SEPA declared the connection between this crisis and long-term contamination.

17 Two influential local newspapers expressed a little concern with the issue. *Yangtze Evening Post* published a short article informing readers that the blue-green algae had appeared and would be harmful to water quality, see, "Blue-green algae has appeared in Tai Lake(*tai hu chu xian lan zao*)," *Yangtze Evening Post*, April 21, 2007. On the contrary, *Xiandai Kuaibao* published a more detailed article. However, this report did not mention the potential danger to water source either. It was an investigative article on the harm of blue-green algae to the tourism industry, with an analysis of the accumulating water pollution in the Tai Lake area. See, "Unexpected earlier boom of blue-green algae makes tourists unhappy(*wu xi tai hu lan zao ti qian bao fa sao le you ren xing*)," *Xiandai Kuaibao*, May 17, 2007.

18 See, for example, "Boom of Tai Lake blue-green algae makes water in Wuxi taste off (*wuxi tai hu lan zao bao fa zi lai shui fa chou*)," *Yangtze Evening Post*, 30th, May, 2007. Jiang Mingdao, "Wuxi City attacked by blue-green algae(*wuxi lanzao gongcheng*)," *China News Week*, June 8, 2007.

19 Citizens rushed into markets to buy water; some planned to escape to other places. See, "Wuxi city attacked by blue-green algae".

20 The blue-green algae broke out near a drinking water source on April 25. See, "Wuxi city attacked by blue-green algae".

21 Brief, *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 2, 2007.

June 8	Local Government's official explanation to frame natural factors as the "chief cause" ²² .
June 10-11	Vice Premier, Zeng, investigated Wuxi City and Jiangsu Province with the directive of the Premier that the crisis suggested the pollution treatment in the Tai Lake area be enhanced. State council discusses raising the environmental standard in the Tai Lake area.
June 13	A formal speech of the Secretary of CPC Jiangsu Provincial Committee was published by main local media, promising to enhance pollution treatment under the "concept of scientific development".
June 29-30	Premier Wen investigated Tai Lake and gave guidelines for local environmental governance.
July 7	Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee and Government held a high level working conference on Tai Lake pollution control. The conference evaluated the effects of the policies in response to the water supply crisis, and formulated concrete targets and policies for maintaining the priority of environmental protection in the Tai Lake area.

* This table is based on the summary of information collected from different media.

An influential local urban newspaper²³, *Yangtze Evening Post*, and CCTV firstly carried the story on May 30²⁴. That noon, the Wuxi Municipal Government gave the explanation that it was a natural disaster. Despite the Wuxi Municipal Government's reiteration that water quality had reached quality standards from June 2 to June 4, rehabilitation measures and introspection on existing environmental governance policies continued, with related media reporting still going on. Finally, a provincial-level conference on local pollution management — it put the raising of environmental standards in the Tai Lake basin and strengthening of coordination among related agencies into the future agenda — concluded from the concentrated media reporting.

Different issue framing of two local commercialized newspapers: the local controlled vs. the Central controlled

Table 2 demonstrates the respective issue frames of the *Yangtze Evening Post* and *Xiandai Kuaibao*. The reason to choose the two dailies is, as introduced before, the Jiangsu

22 Reporting staff, "Huge sewage mass was the chief cause(*juda lanzao wushuituan shi huoshou*)," *Yangtze Evening Post*, June 7, 2007.

23 The newspapers published by party organs for profit. Except the Party censorship, its daily operation is totally marketized and commercialized.

24 On the same day, two main local Party papers, the *Xinhua Daily* and *Wuxi Daily News* published reports with nearly the same contents. It meant the local government had given up blocking the information or ignoring citizens' complaints.

Province had a most competitive media market²⁵, and these two dailies had the largest circulations²⁶. That means, they were similar in high commercialization and marketization, which, in a common sense, was expected to bring them independence from the political control.

However, on the other hand, they were different in their “departments in charge” — the former is supervised by the propaganda department of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee, while the latter belonged to Xinhua News Agency, both the biggest center for collecting information and an institution of the State Council in China, commonly called the “Central media”.

Their main similarities and differences in interpreting this crisis are demonstrated by table 2 and Graph 1 & 2. By the comparison, we can find whether the commercialization or the “direction on public opinion” played the greater role.

Table 2: Reporting focus of *Yangtze Evening Post* and *Xiandai Kuaibao* according to time
 NY = number of articles in *Yangtze Evening Post* that day; NX = number of articles in *Xiandai Kuaibao* that day

Time (NY/NX)	<i>Yangtze Evening Post</i>	<i>Xiandai Kuaibao</i>
May 30 (1/0)	Information about the crisis released.	
May 31 (2/1)	Municipal emergency measures to assure water supply; A purified water company gave help.	Municipal emergency measures to assure water supply.
June 1 (2/3)	Municipal emergency measures showed effectiveness; Provincial leaders paid close attention.	Details of the emergency measures; Provincial leaders paid close attention.
June 2 (5/1)	Provincial management intervened; Governmental measures were successful and comprehensive, and the water quality markedly improved.	Investigative report to demonstrate the connection between this crisis and accumulating environmental pollution.

25 Local newspapers in Jiangsu Province are highly commercialized and sensitive to potential news for the intense market. See, for example, Research Center on Media Development, GAPP: *2007 Chinese Newspaper Competitiveness Report* (2007 zhong guo bao ye jing zheng li jian ce bao gao), 2007. Cui Baoguo and Zhu Mingzuo, “Newspaper Competition in the Yangtze Valley,” record of a symposium in School of Journalism and Communication of Tsinghua University. Source: <http://tech.sina.com.cn/other/2003-10-21/1230246575.shtml>

26 These two newspapers are said to have the highest circulations in Jiangsu Province according to their rank of 60 and 61 in the World Newspaper Congress in 2007 and 2008. Source: http://www.yangtse.com/sytj/jqyz/200806/t20080616_457880.htm

June 4 (1/0)	Provincial leaders investigated related work in Wuxi City.	
June 5 (1/0)	Provincial leaders mentioned strengthening environmental governance as part of the emergency measures.	
June 6 (1/1)	A provincial institution supplied its municipal branch with purified water.	A provincial CCPCC member demanded a pollution index of drinking water to be open to the public.
June 7 (2/1)	Old wells were reused to supplement the water supply; A Wuxi citizen was administratively attached for “spreading rumors”	A special comment implied that data on water quality published by local government might be fake.
June 8 (1/2)	Official explanation of this crisis, emphasizing natural factors as “chief cause”, given (<i>zui kui huoshou</i>).	Official explanation of the cause for the crisis; Five officials in Yixing City ²⁷ were administratively punished for tolerating illegal discharge into Tai Lake ²⁸ .
June 9 (0/1)		Local EPBs planned to enhance management on chemical and tourism industries around the Tai Lake area.
June 11 (1/0)	Old wells were reused.	
June 12 (1/3)	A Vice Premier investigated the local area and gave the Central government directives on strengthening environmental governance.	Central government’s directives on strengthening environmental governance; State council required the raising of local environmental standards; Central government demanded to rectify local chemical plants.
June 13 (1/1)	Secretary of Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee’s formal speech asking to follow Central leaders’ core directives and strengthen environmental governance.	Secretary of Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee’s formal speech.

²⁷ This is a city under the administration of Wuxi Municipal Government, where plenty of highly contaminated chemical plants are concentrated.

²⁸ This local official sanction was taken for the pressure of being exposed by journalists from CCTV. The 5 officials were from the basic administrative level.

June 15 (0/1)		Special comment: advocacy of giving interested citizens the right to prosecute entrepreneurs or officials whom they considered to be responsible for the crisis.
June 17 (1/0)	Recovery of tourism industry in Tai Lake.	
June 18 (0/1)		Recently emerged blue-green algae did not affect the water quality;
June 22 (0/1)		A serious mistake of the local government: enterprises having stopped production were found in the official list considered to be rectified.
June 25 (0/1)		Wuxi Municipal Government declared to close all the sewage outfalls into Tai Lake by the end of 2007.
July 1 (1/1)	Premier Wen investigated the local area.	Premier Wen investigated the local place.
July 3 (1/1)	An outline of Wen's investigation route, emphasizing the local government's active coordination with Central directives.	A special comment demanding local leading cadres to set an example in environmental protection.
July 8 (1/1)	Provincial general meeting on environmental governance in the Tai Lake area held, and the goals and measures decided.	Provincial general meeting on environmental governance in the Tai Lake area held, and the goals and measures decided.
June 9 (1/2)	Another report of that meeting, focused on related policies of various agencies.	Another report of that meeting, emphasizing the local government's responsibility; A new water supply policy of the provincial government came into being.

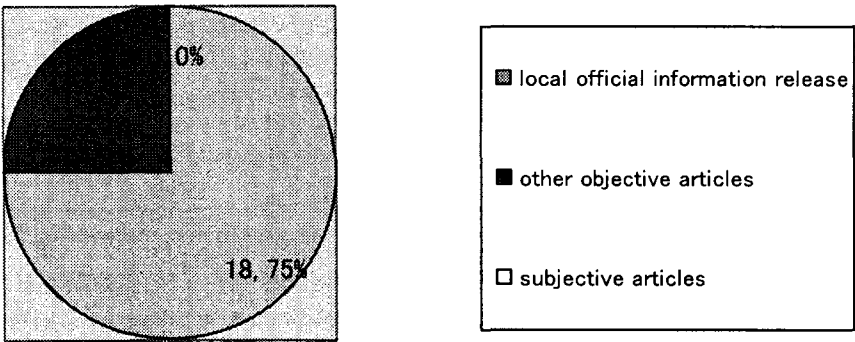
* *Yangtze Evening Post* mostly used news releases of local related agencies, while *Xiandai Kuaibao* used news from Xinhua News Agency and independent investigative reports. The meeting on July 7 summarized the crisis and the emergency measures, and established a new environmental governance plan and emergency answer mechanism for the future. Thus, the concentrated reports in the two local newspapers ended on July 9.

From the reporting contents of these two daily papers, in comparison with the event process outlined in Table 1, we can find several differences. The first is whether emphasis

was placed on environmental pollution or on abnormal natural factors as the cause of the crisis. Although we may differentiate the two as a fundamental cause and immediate cause, emphasis on accumulating environmental pollution drew the attention of the public to claim the local government's responsibility of environmental governance, while emphasis on natural factors helped avoid discussing local governmental responsibility. The *Yangtze Evening Post* before June 12 had not given any prominence to the fundamental cause as environmental deterioration, while *Xiandai Kuaibao*, on June 2 — three days after the official informing of this crisis — published an investigative report, which, using the complaints of interviewed local citizens and conclusions from experts, implied that they aimed to attribute the crisis to the bad performance of the government on pollution management. Even when the two newspapers published the same local official's explanation declaring the crisis to be caused chiefly by a huge sewage mass formed from abnormally high temperature, *Xiandai Kuaibao* added another report that five officials in Yixing City²⁹ were administratively punished for tolerating illegal discharge into Tai Lake³⁰, indicating that the local government also admitted the connection between bad pollution management and the crisis, but refused to confess to the public.

The classification and proportion of content from the *Yangtze Evening Post* and *Xiandai Kuaibao* are shown in Graphs 1 and 2, respectively. The concentrated articles publicized from late May to early July were divided into three categories: information released by local officials with clear marks of related political agencies as the source; other objective articles without marks of political agencies as the source; and subjective articles, editorials, and special comments.

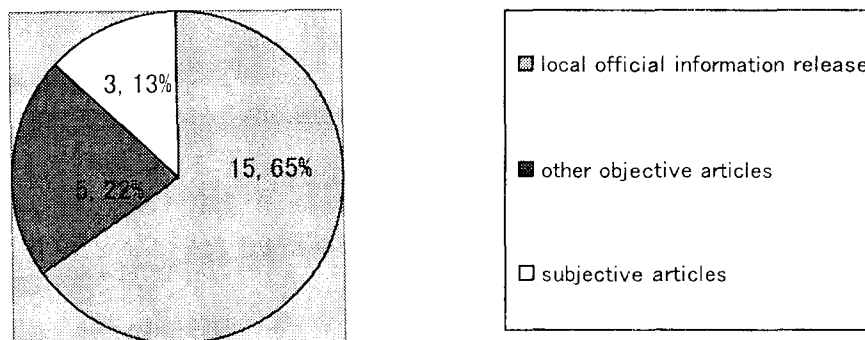
Graph-1: The proportion of article contents in *Yangtze Evening Post*,
Total number=24; Period=May 30 – July 9.



²⁹ This is a city under the administration of Wuxi Municipal Government, where plenty of highly contaminated chemical plants are concentrated.

³⁰ It should be noted that this issue was first exposed by journalists of CCTV, thus the local government was forced to take some measures, and the five officials punished all had a basic level status. Brief, *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 8, 2007.

Graph-2: The proportion of article contents in *Xiandai Kuaibao*.
Total number=23; Period=May 30 – July 9.



As demonstrated, 75% of the content from the *Yangtze Evening Post* depended on official sources, indicating that this newspaper completely followed the issue frame of the local government. After a vice premier investigated the local area on June 11 and 12, the *Yangtze Evening Post* began to emphasize environmental pollution because it had to make his talk and the Central government's main criticism on local environmental governance stand out. The vice premier conveyed Premier Wen's comments that "this crisis has sounded a warning to us, indicating that the long-time Tai Lake water pollution problem didn't get fundamentally solved, and we must attach greater importance"³¹. On June 13, this paper published the formal speech of the Secretary of the Jiangsu Provincial Party Committee, the highest local leader, admitting mistakes in the local government's crisis response mechanism and environmental governance, promising to strengthen pollution management under the Central directive of "scientific development" (*ke xue fa zhan guan*)³².

Judging from Graph 2, although official information accounted for 65% of the related content, it did not cover as much information on the repetitive guidelines of the local top brass as the *Yangtze Evening Post*; such information was used to shape a good image of the local officials to be rapid, responsible, and effective in dealing with the crisis. In addition, *Xiandai Kuaibao* demonstrated more questioning against local officials' announcements of their effectiveness through information from other sources. Two outstanding examples reflected this feature. When the *Yangtze Evening Post* conveyed an official announcement vaguely expressing that the water quality "markedly improved" and "basically reached

31 "Environmental protection standard in the Tai Lake area should be more strict (*tai hu huan bao biao zhun geng gao geng yan*)," *Yangtze Evening Post*, June 12, 2007.

32 The same speech draft was published in both the *Yangtze Evening Post* and *Xiandai Kuaibao* with different titles. See, "Persist in environmental protection priority, improve Tai Lake water quality with joint efforts (*jian jue shi xing huan bao you xian qi xin xie li zhi li tai hu*)," *Yangtze Evening Post*, June 13, 2007. "Thoroughly eradicate the pollution in Tai Lake, making the water become clean again (*che di zheng zhi tai hu shi tai hu shui bian qing*)," *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 13, 2007.

standard”, but with no concrete data³³ on June 2, *Xiandai Kuaibao* kept silent until it published two pertinent articles on June 6 and June 7. The former was on the suggestion of a provincial CPPCC member demanding the local government to regularly publish detailed data on water safety³⁴, and the latter quoted a case in Guangdong Province indicating that even scientific data could be manipulated according to the utility of local officials³⁵. Not surprisingly, on several days, *Xiandai Kuaibao* issued an investigative report exposing serious mistakes of the local government. For example, the Wuxi Municipal Government declared it would close or rectify 71 enterprises considered to be highly contaminated on June 16, but it was discovered that some of them had stopped production several years before, raising the question of whether the local government had taken the environmental work seriously³⁶.

Another difference was in the newspapers’ editorial attitudes. There was no subjective article in the *Yangtze Evening Post* to directly demonstrate the editorial attitudes on the crisis and the government. We might only find in its information, other than official information releases, mostly trivial details, with the efforts of citizens and companies to help themselves highly praised and the local government’s “care” of citizens strongly emphasized.

Xiandai Kuaibao published three sharp special comments. The first was mentioned above, which used a case in Guangdong Province — *Nanfang Dushi Bao* exposed on June 6 that the water quality index of Guangzhou City published by Guangdong Province and Guangzhou Municipality were totally different — to criticize local officials of manipulating data according to their own utility³⁷, although not directly aimed at the local government in the Tai Lake crisis. However, after Central top leaders investigated the local area and the local leader officially announced their work deficiency and promised to follow the Central directives, *Xiandai Kuaibao* became much more aggressive against the local government. A commentary article on June 15 sharply criticized the interests of local officials, who pursued economic increases as their “achievement” (*zheng ji*) at the expense of environmental degradation and the health of residents, to be “the worst enemy of contemporary environmental protection in China”, calling for a “legal right on the environment of citizens” to supervise and influence governmental behavior on environment protection through lawsuits³⁸. The author of this article especially emphasized that it was a better way for the

33 “Water quality in Wuxi City markedly improved(*wu xi zi lai shui shui zhi ming xian hao zhuan*),” *Yangtze Evening Post*, June 2, 2007.

34 “Whether water quality is good should be informed everyday(*shui hao bu hao tian tian rang ren zhi dao*),” *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 6, 2007.

35 “Dirty water could be ‘caroused’ under manipulated data(*shu ju ma bi xia wu shui ye neng chang yin*),” *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 7, 2007.

36 “Closed enterprises were unexpectedly listed to be rectified(*ting chan qi ye jing ran shang le zheng zhi ming dan*),” *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 22, 2007.

37 “Dirty water could be ‘caroused’ under manipulated data”.

38 “Let the legal right of citizens on environment counteract the pollution for economic interest(*rang bai xing huan jing quan lai xiao jie wu ran huan zheng ji*),” *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 15, 2007.

Central government to enforce environmental policies in local areas, rather than just depending on local EPBs. Not surprisingly, another article on July 2 criticizing local officials was also under the name of Central orthodoxy. The commentator, a professor of Nanjing University, by admiring the actions of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen for setting an example for how to save energy and protect the environment, expressed his discontent with local officials³⁹.

Cross-regional supervision in accordance with the Central authority: the analysis according to time

As a typical environmental crisis during recent years, the Tai Lake crisis also drew attraction from remote media within China. Like the Central government-charged *Xiandai Kuaibao*, media in other places conducted a different issue frame from the local media, a process known as cross-regional media supervision⁴⁰. Foreign media described cross-regional supervision as “the practice of sending reporters to investigate wrongdoing in other locations”. While “out-of-towners escape their reach, one of the most effective investigative means involved reporters digging for news in distant parts of the country, away from their own censors”⁴¹.

On June 1, the third plenary meeting of the emergency headquarters for this crisis, which allowed thirty media agencies nationwide to sit in⁴², showed an attitude of information transparency, but, cross-regional media started to participate in the reporting earlier from May 31.

Table 3: The cross-regional media focus according to time.

Time	Focus
May 30	Drinking water polluted; Local residents rushed to buy water.
May 31	Local residents rushed to buy water; A certain social panic and discontent; Governmental response: driving Yangtze River water into Tai Lake and appeased public emotions.
June 1	Central governmental agency’s intervention in emergency response; Residents’ inconvenience had not been alleviated; Peripheral area had not been affected.

39 “President’s plain dressing in meeting and Premier’s drinking Tai Lake water(*zong shu ji jian zhuang yu hui he zong li xi pin tai hu shui*),” *Xiandai kuaibao*, July 2, 2007.

40 Zhan Jiang ed., *Watcher of Social Transformation in China: Context and Practice of Media Supervision in the New Century*, Beijing: China Customs Press, 2002, p. 47.

41 Geoffrey A. Fowler and Jason Dean, “China’s reporters face a back lash over investigations,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2006.

42 Brief, *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 2, 2007.

June 2	Vice Premier Zeng gave comments on environmental governance; Local governmental measures to appease public emotions: prohibit binding up water prices, and reducing the water fee by half in June.
June 3 – 4	Local government declared that the water quality reached standards, with no carcinogen included. Recovery of water supply.
June 5	SEPA's press conference announcing the connection between the crisis and environmental pollution; Local provincial leaders announce to strengthen environmental protection.
June 6 – 7	Repetition of SEPA's press conference and its judgment; A local citizen was attached for the name of "spreading rumors".
June 8 – late July	Five local officials of a city in Jiangsu Province were administratively punished for delinquency in environmental governance ⁴³ ; The State Council held a special meeting for environmental governance on Tai Lake, raising environmental standards in the area; Jiangsu Province closed 772 chemical plants against environmental standards.

* Most of the objective articles were based on Xinhua News Agency's news, with a few independent investigative reports.

Table 3 demonstrates the cross-regional media's focus according to time: on May 30 and May 31, besides spreading the news of this crisis nationwide, media reports emphasized the inconvenience brought to local citizens and governmental emergency response; on June 1 and June 2, Central governmental intervention was added, with the framing of words implying the Central attitude taken on this issue was as an artificial environmental crisis; local official declaration that the crisis was relieved prevailed on June 3 and June 4; the focus of June 5 and June 6 was the press conference of SEPA, which further impressed the audience that the local government had been in breach of its duty in environmental governance; on June 6 the news reported that a local citizen was arrested for "spreading rumors", and the next day, this action was given negative evaluation by several media; from June 8, related reports obviously reduced and became less concentrated until late July when media reports were about how to improve environmental governance in future.

Like *Xiandai Kuaibao*, the cross-regional media were inclined to frame the issue as an artificial crisis, an "outbreak of long-term imbalance of economic development and environmental protection"⁴⁴. Judging from Table 3, the outline of the inconvenience brought to local citizens by this crisis and following social instability was also a focus from the early stage, implying that the local emergency measure was not as effective as the local

⁴³ These officials were announced to be responsible for conniving illegal waste discharge even during this crisis.

⁴⁴ Jiang Gaoming, "Why a place famous for its beautiful water became short of water(*jiang nan shui xiang yuan he nao shui huang*)," *Beijing News*, June 3, 2007.

government had announced. Further, editorials and special comments sharply expressed their discontent with the local governmental direction on public opinion: no formal response to citizens questioning the water quality the first two days⁴⁵, the mayor of Wuxi's announcement to deny the connection between the crisis and industrial pollution⁴⁶, a governmental newsman's insisting that water quality met standards, albeit with a bad smell⁴⁷, declaration of this crisis as purely a "sudden happening"⁴⁸. The goal of the local government was considered by cross-regional media as to escape from their responsibility, conceal their failure to solve pollution problems in long term, and to use the media as a propaganda tool. Some wrote ironically, "when confronted with a crisis, although the importance of direction on public opinion is not to be denied, it didn't justify hiding the truth"⁴⁹. However, although the original intention of blocking information was to keep stability, the non-transparency was exactly the cause of "great panic among residents"⁵⁰. Xinhua News Agency issued a piece of news that a local citizen was attached for "spreading rumors", which was judged by remote media as a governmental behavior to suppress dissent to their announcement of the drinking water safety⁵¹.

The initiative agenda-setting of the cross-regional media: analysis of the contents

However, the considerable interest of these cross-regional media was due not only to the crisis itself as a piece of big news to excavate, but, judging from these reports, especially the subjective articles, their wanting to frame this crisis as a typical case representative of similar issues throughout the country⁵² rather than an accident isolated in a single place. Thus, rather than excavating scoops, they focused more on discussing the general significance. Some hoped the reports on the Tai Lake water crisis would warn audiences of the possibility of similar happenings in other places⁵³, expecting the discussion on the

45 Li Bin, "Taihu pollution shouldn't be given a blind eye (*tai hu wu ran qi neng yan bu jian wei jing*)," *Information Times*, May 31, 2007.

46 Wang Yongchen, "Is Tai Lake water crisis a natural or man-made calamity? (*tai hu shui huang shi tian zai hai shi ren huo*)," *Beijing News*, June 1, 2007.

47 Editorial, "Who's the most necessary to reflect upon Wuxi crisis (*wu xi shui wei ji shi jian shui zui gai fan xing*)," *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, June 1, 2007.

48 "How could Tai Lake pollution be taken out of sight and out of mind?"

49 "Who's the most necessary to reflect upon the Wuxi crisis".

50 Zhao Zhijiang, "Tai Lake water crisis shouldn't be forgotten (*tai hu shui bie cheng le yi bei wang qing shui*)," *Yangzhao Dushi Bao*, June 7, 2007. It's not a simple assumption.

51 This attached person spread the message that "Tai Lake water contained carcinogens 200 times over standards" through mobile phone. But there was some related research that might prove that carcinogens in Tai Lake water were exactly over standard. Even according to official data published by Jiangsu Province in May 2007, cancer patients in Jiangsu Province accounted for as much as 12% of the whole country, caused by serious water pollution.

52 Water pollution all over China makes similar suffering crises possible not only in Wuxi, or the Tai Lake area. For details on this serious situation, see, for example, Ma Jun, *China's Water Crisis*, Beijing: China Environmental Scientific Publication, 1999; IPE, *China's Water Pollution Map*, source: <http://www.ipe.org.cn/>

53 See, for example, Ma Longsheng, "Wuxi water pollution is a great alarm (*wu xi shui wu ran shi zen yang yi ji cheng zhong de jing zhong*)," *Yangcheng Wanbao*, June 2, 2007. In this article, the author considered that it would be very natural for everybody to wonder if a similar crisis could happen in the city he lives in.

solution would provide reference to solutions for other water pollution cases⁵⁴.

The discussion might be divided into three levels according to the degree of risk: 1) the local government still had some alternative methods to sanction remote media when they were irritated; 2) publishing journalists committing on-spot investigations or exercising pressure on the Central government to sanction the media administrator or the editor⁵⁵; and, 3) the discussion on certain topics might challenge the legitimacy or core value of the Central authority.

The first level of the discussions was the repetitive emphasis on serious environmental pollution and the demand for more effective governance. Some of the articles were written by famous environmental activists⁵⁶, which indicated the close relation between environmental journalists and activists. However, as discussed in the last section, such contents were strongly encouraged by Central leaders' directives and were of hardly any risk.

The second level of the discussion was on how to improve the political system by forcing officials to perform their duties well. For example, some suggested vesting more power to the SEPA and local EPBs for a more coordinate enforcement of Central environmental policies⁵⁷. Some others suggested perfecting the rule of law, like by requiring a law to ascertain local officials' criminal responsibilities in environmental governance⁵⁸, or calling for a guarantee of directly interested citizens' rights to prosecute related governmental departments⁵⁹. Also worthy of mentioning is that, since they involved suggestions on resource reallocation in the political sphere, which might harm some actors with vested interests, to reduce the risk, all of these articles explicitly or implicitly conveyed the Central governmental orthodoxy. For example, the *China Youth Daily*, which advocated investigating local officials' criminal responsibilities, utilized the speech of Premier Wen and precedents to punish local officials penally in Shandong Province and Heilongjiang Province⁶⁰.

The last and riskiest level was the discussion of whether to apply more public participation in environmental governance. Such advocacy was not as clearly expressed as

54 Wang Wenqi, "How to effectively prevent illegal pollution discharge (*ru he cai neng you xiao e zhi wei fa pai wu*)," *Guangzhou Daily*, June 13, 2007.

55 *Southern Weekend* and the *Bing Dian Weekly*, both influential activists in cross-regional supervision, had been officially sanctioned several times, reflecting their threat those in power. In 2005, local leaders from 17 provinces and municipalities jointly wrote a letter to the central government for prohibition against cross-regional supervision. See, Ji Shuoming, "Relying on economic strength, the local government dared say no to the central government", *Yazhou zhouban*, Vol. 19(39), 2005.

56 See, for example, Wang, "Is the Tai Lake water crisis a natural or man-made calamity," Jiang "Why a place famous for its beautiful water became short of water".

57 "The approach of nine the nine year pollution improvement in the Tai Lake area became controversial: environmental protection immediately requires public participation (*tai hu jiu nian zhi li lu jing re zheng yi: huan bao ji xu gong zhong can yu*)," *Diyicajing Ribao*, June 7, 2007.

58 Ruan Zhanjiang, "Officials responsible for Tai Lake pollution should be punished penally (*tai hu shi jian ying wen guan yuan xing ze*)," *China Youth Daily*, June 2, 2007.

59 See, for example, Ou Muhua, "Wuxi water accident shouldn't only blame for blue-green algae (*wu xi yin shui shi jian bu jin shi lan zao wen ti*)," *Yanzhao Dushi Bao*, June 1, 2007. Wang, "How to effectively prevent illegal pollution discharge".

60 "Officials responsible for Tai Lake pollution should be punished penally".

the other suggestions. The most interested in this topic seemed to be the newspapers under of the Nangfang Media Group⁶¹, known as Nangfang Baoxi (Southern Newspapers)⁶².

On June 1, *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, the highest circulated daily newspaper of Nangfang Baoxi, published its first editorial, pointed out that the dilemma in China's environmental governance was that "the interested mass was powerless, while officials with power paid little attention"⁶³. The subsequent editorials were all based on this point, especially in their focus on how to improve the capability of citizens to ensure their rights. To put it concretely, some made a general demand to supervise the local government through "an effective channel between the public opinion and Central decision makers"; another recommended an effective European operational model, in which public participation in environmental issues become the decisive power⁶⁴. In the later stage, the influential weekly, *Southern Weekend*, took its advantage of investigative reports. Based on deliberations of the situation and the deficiency in official governance, it interviewed several civil environmentalists. The main focus of this article⁶⁵ was the great efforts of grass root environmentalists and their poor surroundings with limited registration, poor sponsorship, and few young volunteers. On the other hand, while highly praising the civil struggle to protect the Tai Lake environment, the article also put a premium on the attempts of some open-minded local officials to encourage the growth of social power.

Analysis of the reporting: the strategy of mass media to take use of the Central-local contradiction

Since this crisis reflected the general "tragedy of the commons"⁶⁶ in China, it was natural that the spearhead of complaints would have been firstly pointed to the local government in charge of allocating public goods, with the inconvenience brought to residents

61 See, editorial, "Who should contemplate in Wuxi water crisis". Lian Yue, "Environmental problems can bear stalling tactics no more (*huan jing wen ti yi wu fa zai shi huan bing zhi ji*)", *Nanfang Dushi Bao*, June 16, 2007. Editorial, "Power of Public Decision on Environmental Protection (*huan jing bao hu de gong zhong jue ding li*)", *Southern Weekend*, June 18th, 2007. Huang Xiaowei, "Social force is still weak in Tai Lake environmental pollution improvement (*tai hu zhi wu min jian li liang yi ran bo ruo*)", *Southern Weekend*, August 12, 2007.

62 These newspapers, especially the *Southern Weekend* which is known as the largest circulation weekly in China, have been the pioneer in "cross-regional supervision" from 1990s. Exposure of a lot of scandals has brought them high reputation in the public and great pressure from many local governments. For more details on the official sanction to "*nan fang bao xi*" for its being "too negative", see, <http://www.peacehall.com/news/gb/english/2002/10/200210290950.shtml>

63 "Who should contemplate in Wuxi water crisis".

64 "Power of Public Decision on Environmental Protection".

65 "Social force is still weak in Tai Lake environmental pollution improvement".

66 The commonly known economic theory, raised by Garrett Hardin to describe a dilemma in which multiple individuals acting independently in their own self-interest can ultimately destroy a shared resource even where it is clear that it is not in anyone's long term interest for this to happen, was widely used by Chinese intellectuals to explain the waste of public goods during the reform period without the definition of property rights. For more details of the delima of natural resources distribution in China, see, for example, Zhang Shiqiu, "Analyzing the phenomena of inefficient resource allocation an natural asset capture by powerful groups", in CASS: Research Center of Environment and Development, *China Environment and Development Review*, Vol. 3, Beijing: Social Science Documentation Publishing House, 2007, pp. 285-294.

and the following social stability challenging the local officials' legitimacy. Thus, for the local government, it was quite important to reduce the spread of negative information and complaints among the citizens, under the name of keeping "social harmony and stability"⁶⁷. Obviously, in this case, governmental control prevailed over the market demand at the local-level. The local newspaper, *Yangtze Evening Post*, despite of its high commercialization, gave 75% of its coverage to official information, with no material investigative report or any negative contents; its contents were similar to the local Party newspapers.

The Central governmental direction on public opinion was reflected in the *People's Daily*, the official organ of CPC Central Committee. This crisis was judged as "a seemingly natural disaster with the substance of human calamity"⁶⁸. What might be more important was its underlining that the local government had made costly mistakes in development⁶⁹, and declared that it was the local officials' pursuit of mere GDP growth⁷⁰ that made them violate Central policies on regional environmental governance, undermining the expected effect of Central plan⁷¹. Further, this newspaper suggested that those officials having connived on an excessive pollution discharge be made responsible⁷².

According to the combination analysis of the event process (Table 1) and the media focus in time order (Tables 2 and 3), we might find that along with the Central governmental intervention going deeper — from the related agencies MWR and SEPA to the vice premier in charge of environmental governance and the premier as well as general directives given to field and investigation by high-level leaders — the media attitude toward the local government became more critical. For example, Xiandai Kuaibao, before Vice Premier Zeng investigated the local area and gave Premier Wen's directive, took the tactics of irony, implication, and allusion to express its discontent with the local government. However, later criticism included in investigative reports and subjective articles were directly aimed at the local government and the crisis, as conveyed by Zeng and then expressed by Wen himself during his later investigation of the local area: "Despite many years of Tai Lake pollution management, the problem was not solved. This water crisis warned us to pay more attention to the threat. The cause of this crisis needs to be analyzed more deeply and carefully. The local government is responsible to propose new schemes and measures, strengthening

67 "The Provincial meeting on Tai Lake water pollution and blue-green algae management was held yesterday(*sheng tai hu liu yu shui wu ran fang zhi ji lan zao zhi li xian chang hui zuo zhao kai*)," *Yangtze Evening Post*, June 2, 2007.

68 "Tai Lake blue-green algae alarms".

69 See, for example, "Tai Lake blue-green algae alarms (*tai hu lan zao qiao xiang le jing zhong*)," *People's Daily*, Overseas Version, June 2, 2007. "Pollution is the main cause of Wuxi water crisis (*wu xi lan zao shui weiji wu ran shi zhu yin*)," *People's Daily*, June 4, 2007. "New southern Jiangsu economic mode: transmuted GDP (*xin su nan mo mo shi shan bian de GDP*)," *People's Daily*, May 29, 2007.

70 "New southern Jiangsu economic mode: transmuted GDP".

71 See, for example, "Blue-green algae send out warning light to Tai Lake (*lan zao gei tai hu liang hong deng*)," June 1, 2007. "Pollution is the main cause of Wuxi water crisis".

72 "Pollution is the main cause of Wuxi water crisis".

pollution control and comprehensive treatment.”⁷³ This statement made clear the issue frame of the Central authority, bringing encouragement to the media. In addition, the investigation implied a face-to-face communication of Central and local leaders, the official announcement thereafter indicating an ultimate result of compromise. A formal speech by the Secretary of CPC Jiangsu Provincial Committee was published by the local major media — he promised to enhance pollution treatment under the Central authority’s core value, “concept of scientific development”⁷⁴ — demolished the former local official explanation to emphasize natural factors, which implied the issue frame of the Central government prevailed in this game between the Central and local governments.

Hidden in the difference of direction on public opinion was the basic difference between the Central and local government in environmental policies and even their core value. For the Central government, environmental protection is a core policy in the national agenda⁷⁵. For the fourth generation of leaders, it is a characteristic different from that of their predecessors who provided the legitimacy of the CCP through economic growth. The governance model in the Tai Lake basin — Central governmental budget and local governmental execution — hides a potential conflict between Central and local government and among local governments. There is a common recognition among the Central related agencies. The deputy director of SEPA, Pan Yue, considered, there was a “special interest group” in local areas to obstruct the enforcement of environment-favored policies. Officials aim to boost their records by supporting heavy industry and the businesses they protect convert the shared, environmental resources into profits; this not only interferes with Central government’s macroeconomic controls but also infringes on the rights of the public”⁷⁶. Factually, SEPA expressed more than once their need of the media to exercise pressure on the local government and other powerful development-oriented agencies⁷⁷.

While following the direction of the Central government, some of the Central media and

73 “Premier Wen gave comments that the Tai Lake pollution alarmed us (*wen zong li pi shi tai hu shui wu ran gei wo men qiao xiang jing zhong*),” *Xiandai Kuaibao*, June 12, 2007.

74 “Thoroughly eradicate the pollution in Tai Lake, making the water become clean again”.

75 Environmental protection was listed on the agenda of the 17th National Congress of the CPC. See, Hu Jintao, *Report of the 17th National Congress of the CPC*, article 3, article 5-4, 2007. Because of both the serious environmental deterioration and its being a trigger for social unrest, environmental governance has obtained high attention from the central government.

76 Liu Jianqiang, “The ‘special interests’ destroying China’s environment”, *Chinadialogue*, January 24, 2007. Source: <http://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/715-The-special-interests-destroying-China-s-environment>

77 The central measures for environmental protection were undermined by the “special interest group” of local officials and industry; thus, the mass media was needed to act in concert with the central agencies to exercise pressure on the local government. This view was repeatedly expressed by the most important figure of SEPA, Deputy Director Pan Yue. With his father-in-law as a former vice president, he was advantageous in political power struggles. See, for example, “Pan Yue raised seven polices for environmental protection and economic mode, claiming environmental protection has been confronted with interest conflict (*pan yue ti qi xiang huan jing ji zheng ce cheng huan bao jian she mian lin li yi chongtu*),” *Beijing News*, September 10, 2007. “Pan Yue asserted media supervision had advanced the environmental protection (*pan yue: yu lun jian du zheng zai tui dong she hui jin bu*),” *China Youth Daily*, April 27, 2007. “Media supervision may cover the shortage of environmental enforcement (*mei ti jian du ke mi bu huan jing zhi fa bu zu*),” *China Youth Daily*, January 16, 2007.

remote media tried to promote an issue frame emphasizing more “political” topics. Different from their foregoers in the 1980s, contemporary journalists pursuing press freedom and advocating political change resist in more moderate ways⁷⁸. Without opposing the system as a whole, they conduct their advocacy as solutions to certain problems. A veteran investigative journalist considered environmental governance in China a “new democracy” process for open-minded officials and the public to improve civil rights⁷⁹. Thus, it was not strange that the employer of this journalist, the South Newspaper Group, became the most active actor in such an issue frame, impressing the audience that expanding “public participation” was the only way to fundamentally solve the dilemma in environmental governance.

We might notice that the media strategically employed discourse symbols raised by the Central authority, especially the “rule by law” (*fǎ zhī*), and “public participation” (*gong zhong can yu*), which is used as an alternative concept of “democracy”, to express their own advocacy. These symbols repetitively appeared in top leaders’ discourse, but they still lacked clear and orthodox meaning; thus, to employ them could reduce the risk of discussing political topics. In addition, utilization of such symbols could make the advocacy of the media meaningful both to the public and political actors, and thus, draw resonance of potential alliances as far as possible.

Another point to be noticed was, the media’s challenging the local government’s direction benefited from the stable surroundings. Although this crisis induced a degree of social panic with complaints from the public, there was no social protest, and no social force tried to intervene in the policymaking, thus, the state could conduct it as a “social problem” caused by local governmental mistakes, which could be solved inside the system. If there were any social protests, especially organized ones, or any other severe conflict between the public and government, the Central government might have defined it as a political problem, caring more for stability, and there would not have been any space for the media to conduct their own issue frame.

Conclusions:

Judging from the media reporting in this representative environmental crisis, we can find that, although the marketization and commercialization of Chinese mass media provided

78 In the 1980s, the media innovationists conducted a direct confrontation with the government, especially the senior journalist who wanted to depend on some open-minded leaders in the “intra-Party” struggle (*dangnei douzheng*) to put their demand of press freedom into the political agenda. See, for example, Hu Jiwei, *Autobiographies of Hu Jiwei*, Hong Kong: zhao yue wen hua publication, 2006. Yang Meirong, “A long way toward a free press: the case of the World Economic Herald”, in Carol Lee Hamrin and Zhao Suisheng, ed., *Decision-making in Deng’s China: Perspectives from Insiders*, Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1995, pp. 182-188. Tan Frank, “The people’s daily: politics and popular will-journalistic defiance in China during the spring of 1989,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 2, (Summer, 1990), pp. 151-169. Lee, *Media, market, and democracy in China*, pp. 36-39.

79 Liu Jianqiang, “China’s environmental crisis catalyzes new democracy movement,” *Yazhou Zhoukan*, Vol. 21 (14), April 15, 2007.

the dynamics for journalists to pursue media freedom, it did not necessarily lead to media independence from political control. Chinese mass media still must keep accordance with the political orthodoxy, known as “direction on public opinion” in practice. In this case study, the performances of the two most influential commercialized dailies in the local place clearly indicated the point.

In addition, there was no obvious indication that any social power had effectively influenced the crisis reporting. Although the mass media demonstrated the advocacy of “public interest”, “civil right” and “public participation”, in the media texts, there were very few detailed expressions of the local citizens, or deep investigative reports, which indicated that very few media had directly accessed to the local citizens. Thus, either the “public interest” emphasized or the “civil right” demanded in the media texts were rather a general “image” than the special interest or requirement of the citizens in the certain place.

However, the comparison analysis of the local and the remote mass media indicated that the fragmentation of environmental policy-making and concrete implementation between the Central and the local government — the two main actors conducting the direction on public opinion — provided an opportunity for the media flexibility. For this crisis, as the Central Government had taken long-lasting efforts to manage the pollution in this area, firstly, there had already been a consensus among the leaders and the related agencies, which made it possible for the Central Government to carry out a uniform direction on the public opinion, and, secondly, the contradiction between the Central and the local government on this issue had already been found during the long-term management — the local government were reluctant to strengthen the pollution control at the expense of GDP increase, let alone corruption and rent-seeking behaviors — thus, this crisis also became a chance for the Central to urge the local to complete their tasks by following the Central directives. Under these circumstances, the mass media, especially the cross-regional media can challenge the local governmental authority under the encouragement of the Central government.

However, the mass media outcomes — how they frame the words of certain environmental issues — heavily depend on the Central-local power game, with four correlation factors: 1) a serious contradiction between the Central policy and the local implementation, 2) intimate connections among the interests of local governments or powerful officials, 3) a discontent with the local government among the public, and 4) progressed into antagonistic behaviors, especially organized or with violence. Generally, a high degree of the first factor brings a stronger Central intervention, with a high degree of the second leading the local government to enforce more limitations. A high degree of the third leads the Central government to encourage the mass media to criticize the local government in order to appease the public. But, in the case of the fourth, both the Central and the local governments are inclined more to limit the spread of information in order to maintain social stability.

The Tai Lake issue demonstrated a high degree of the first factor but a low degree of the second, with a high degree of the third but without achieving the level of the fourth. Thus, although the local mass media-control mechanism maintained the normal operation, the media supervision basically reached its goals: the first was a mutual goal between the mass media and the Central government that forced the local government to admit their mistakes and promise to strengthen environmental governance after the Central directives; the second was to give some suggestions of a democratic nature for the future agenda of environmental governance, which is also a common purpose of the Chinese environmental journalism.